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ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching academic writing to foreign graduate students at the University of Florida is described. The course combines general and technical writing assignments to sharpen students' critical thinking skills while improving their organizational techniques and editing strategies. Assignments are designed to help students discover the links between their current academic interests and previous experiences. The class provides an environment in which students can explore several learning styles, and independent work is combined with peer editing and bi-weekly conferences in a form of Vygotskian tutorial. Several assignments are described to illustrate how combining papers on language learning and culture can improve subsequent drafts on research papers. (MSE)

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March 14, 1988

T88-PRES.PAP
ESL HIGHER EDUCATION

Anne M. Wyatt-Brown

Presented at the 22nd Annual TESOL Convention
8-13 March 1988, Chicago, Illinois

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# MINI-THESIS WRITING COURSE FOR INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

Universities in the United States are creating courses to improve the writing of international graduate students so that they can produce their dissertations without too much difficulty and publish papers in English-language journals. Many of these courses emphasize technical writing assignments exclusively. An outstanding example was described in a recent Tesol Quarterly in which John Swales argued that in classes of 20 technically educated students, it was helpful to combine the sociology of science, citations analysis, technical writing and English for academic purposes (Swales, 1987, 41-44). His suggestions make very good sense and would enrich any graduate student course in technical writing. But in my experience not all of the problems that our students encounter when writing can be addressed by giving them more technical writing courses. In fact, they could benefit from some of the techniques that are currently being used in good general writing courses for undergraduates at the university level.

To begin with it is obvious that people in technical fields need to be able to communicate to a broader audience than just their fellow professionals (Huckin & Olsen, 1983). Furthermore, according to the graduate student advisors to whom I have talked, international students write acceptable technical papers but have

difficulty when writing their dissertations or taking qualifying exams. They have problems with these tasks because both kinds of writing demand a broader knowledge of English than they possess. The exams present one kind of problem. For example, sometimes they do not understand the questions, especially if the examiner uses metaphorical language of any kind. They also have trouble applying a process they have learned in one context to another. The dissertation, on the other hand, presents slightly different challenges. On the whole, they can handle its technical aspects but experience difficulty writing up the discussion section because the task demands that they connect their data to some larger theory or body of knowledge. In summary, international students have the greatest problem in three areas: critical thinking, an ability to write persuasively for a general audience, and the competence necessary to revise and edit their work. I suggest that we can improve student performance in these areas by combining general and technical writing assignments in one course. But before beginning to describe my methods, I would like briefly to describe the students for whom I am responsible.

Since the University of Florida is a land-grant school, most of the international students are in Engineering, Agriculture, Building Construction, Architecture or some other technical area, but each semester there are some from English, Political Science, Anthropology, Philosophy, or Linguistics. There are two main groups, oriental students from Taiwan, Mainland China, and Korea, and Spanish or Portuguese speakers from Latin America. There is

also a sizeable contingent from Thailand, Indonesia, and Africa, along with an occasional European. The students' previous exposure to English varies dramatically. By and large the Orientals possess fairly good grammar but find speaking and listening difficult. Latins, on the other hand, speak readily but have trouble with grammar. The students from anglophone areas (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or South Africa) may well have been educated in English, but they speak a different language at home. Because of the transfer of that native language to English, their grammar and syntax are not standard American or British English. A few have attended an American intensive language program or have even taken a degree at an American university where they have had an English class similar to the one I am teaching.[1] After the screening test, we accept a total of about 40-50 students per semester, who are then subdivided into small sections of about 8 apiece.[2] The classes are predominantly male, with a sprinkling of women. All of the

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1. The fact that they need more English is not a sign that the previous course was unsuccessful. Many of my students need several semesters of English before they are ready to write a thesis on their own.

[2] At the University of Florida we have a screening procedure for all entering foreign graduate students with TOEFL scores below 550 or GRE verbal scores below 320. They write an essay on a general topic and are scored holistically on a scale of 1-4 by two graders from the English department. By the way I am in the Linguistics Program, which is quite separate from the English department. Students who receive 6 or better may be exempt altogether at my discretion, but some elect to take the class or one in technical and research writing that I offer to slightly more advanced international graduate students. All the others must take Scholarly Writing in order to meet a graduate school requirement.

students are, exceptionally bright and highly motivated. Although they are willing to work hard, they often carry a heavy load of courses in their fields as well as demanding research-assistantships. Several of these classes are taught by Linguistics graduate students, who have heavy class loads as well, so I prepare a common syllabus.

The syllabus rests on the assumption that critical thinking provides the cornerstone for the other skills they need. We are aware that some of these students have not been previously encouraged to think critically. Like their American counterparts, they too seldom know how to analyze material in a sophisticated fashion. Sometimes altogether too much of their previous education has involved extensive memorization, what one of my teachers used to call "parrot learning." To make matters worse, graduate students in contrast to undergraduates, present writing teachers with special problems. Money constraints force them to shorten their apprenticeships, and they are too busy to do much of the personal writing that good process writing texts generally recommend (Raimes, 1987). To be honest, these students and their academic advisers are often scornful of personal writing because they think it will interfere with an expeditious progress toward their degrees.

Given those constraints, I believe their deficits in critical thinking can be addressed in several ways. First, we must give the students interesting material to read, essays that are appropriate to sophisticated adults but will perhaps

challenge their assumptions. That is by no means easy, since most ESL writing textbooks are written for intensive programs or for less sophisticated undergraduates. I have selected Oster's From Reading to Writing, even though it was written for undergraduates, because it includes essays about culture, language, computers and other intellectual issues that are important to international students. Over the years I have been able to use this text successfully, and it has encouraged me to develop some personal writing assignments, in the guise of exposing them to ways of organizing topics. For example, the idea for Essay 1 on childhood [#2, Writing Assignments, p. 1] came from an organizational exercise in Oster. Every year that essay elicits some remarkable responses and provides information about the students' previous educational and personal experiences data which help us teach them better.

Second, when we discuss the reading, I try to encourage all the students to think from a new perspective. Since they come from all over the world, they can learn a great deal from each other. Of course, even getting them to read the assignment can be a problem, because some seem to think that a writing course should exist without reading. This year I have tried to assign the students in advance a specific question for which they are responsible. As a result, most of them have been better prepared.

Third, the instructions for most of the writing assignments, and especially the term paper, stress the importance of

developing a strong thesis. Whenever possible, the topics are worded so that they have to have some kind of a thesis. Even a description can have a persuasive point [#2, Semester Impromptus, p.4, convince a friend to visit some place that is very special]. In view of the fact that many students would prefer to report the findings of agricultural pamphlets, we make sure that their plan for the term paper [#6 Writing Assignments, p. 1] includes a thesis statement or at least an hypothesis, from which a thesis can emerge. Furthermore, the other essay assignments [#2 &7, p. 1, plus Supplementary Essay Topics, pp. 3] often require them to apply material that they have learned in one context to another. By all these means, reading, discussion and demanding a clear thesis, the students learn to think more critically by the end of the semester.

In the second area, writing persuasively for a general audience, I have found that many of them have difficulty in even beginning the process of explaining what is important about their work. Sometimes they regard the question as an unnecessary intrusion. For example, about 18 months ago I had a student who specialized in plotting algorithms that measure the usable work space of a robot's arm. When I asked him why he wanted the measurements, he mentioned the problem of dead space. Robot's arms are not as flexible as human arms so there is a lot of space that they cannot reach. However, when I pressed him to expand upon the implications of his work, he came to a halt. He seemed to have no idea how his work fit into a larger scheme of things.

After much time a more complete picture emerged. In spite of the worry of workers, robots are not about to replace humans completely because of their limited functioning. My student's figures, however, will allow proper placement of the robot, which will speed up production and make the assembly line more efficient. During the semester he learned that being able to explain his work to a non-technical audience might make the difference when he applied to his government or to some agency for funding in the future. After all most bureaucrats and foundation decision makers are not experts in robotics. Unless he can learn to make a convincing explanation of the importance of his project, he might find it difficult in future to get the money he needs for his research.

Far from being able to write convincingly about their research, most of the students have learned to produce what writing teachers know as perfunctory writing; that is words whose only function are to satisfy an academic requirement. According to Nancy Martin (1983, 52-58), a British writing specialist who has worked with James Britton, the reason why most students, including native speakers, produce perfunctory writing is that too early in their studies their writing has been restricted to the academic transactional variety. Since they have little sense of audience, they cannot use the expressive function of language, which is one of the first stages of writing. Non-native speakers often have a related problem because the authoritarian education techniques in the third-world

do not appear to foster student creativity. Scientifically gifted students have rarely been encouraged to learn to communicate their passionate interest in science. In fact I suspect that even when they write in their own language, they have trouble writing expressively as well. Of course, there are exceptions. Every semester I get some poets who express themselves beautifully even though they have not mastered all of English grammar. But according to the testimony of their essays, as soon as these students entered school, they found they had little time to play. As a result they had little opportunity to develop the connections between make-believe play, drawing and writing that Vygotsky believed is "a key point in the development of writing in a child" (Martin 1983: 166). Because of intense pressure from their parents and teachers, they had to grow up very fast. They were not encouraged to use the "inner speech" described so well by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1934/86:3). Inner speech is the language in which we make plans.[3] Small children speak these thoughts out loud while adults internalize them. This internal monologue allows them to convert thought to writing because it allows them to rehearse what they will do before they try to carry out their plans. Our students--and of course some native speakers--seem to have little idea that they can use this inner voice to help them plan what

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[3] Marian Hong, a student of mine, has in her observations of Korean pre-school girls, noticed that they do not talk much as they play (oral report, Feb. 25, 1988). Perhaps the oriental upbringing discourages non-instrumental verbal communication.

they are going to write and how they will organize it. As a result, their organizing strategies are inadequate. Since they have not learned to rely on their inner voices, I use small group techniques in order to give them many opportunities to talk about their projected plans long before they put any words on the page. Of course, the graduate classroom can not be a creative writing class, but if assignments are carefully chosen for their appropriateness, the students begin to develop their creativity.

Since one of our chief goals is to encourage these students to become independent writers, and each student learns best in different ways, the class provides an environment in which they can explore several learning styles (Reid 1987). Independent work is combined with peer editing and a bi-weekly conference, a combination which attempts to extend what Vygotsky (1934/86:187) called the student's "zone of proximal development." For example, the term paper assignment provides an opportunity to see what the students can do when they receive as much assistance as they can absorb. I divide the process into small steps [Writing Assignments, p. 1], and even try to teach them how to read their material more interactively [How to Take Notes, p. 3]."* We hope that by having them work independently, in groups and with the instructor they will find a method that works for them. With luck they can discover the relationship of their personal knowledge to their technical work, which ultimately makes it

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* Adapted from assignment of Andrea Tyler, English Language Institute, University of Florida, 1987.

easier for them to take charge of the writing process. The confidence that they gain should make it easier for them to establish the connection in their dissertations between theoretical principles and empirical data and to present the findings clearly.

In the third area, revising and editing, I have several techniques with which I have experimented. Over the years, I have been frustrated by the fact that students rarely revise their work. They correct the mistakes that we point out. Like a lot of teachers, I have tried to teach them to do peer editing. Borrowing an idea from Allen Tilley, a professor at North Florida, this semester I have put together a sheet of suggested questions to help them go about their task of helping one another. [Peer Editing, p. 4] We also do other kinds of small group work in the class.[7] Students report on their work in progress and give numerous short presentations. In that way they educate their audience so that we can be good readers of their topics, but at the same time these disparate readers encourage the writers to address themselves more appropriately to the non-specialist.

Besides peer editing, I have also tried another kind of experiment to improve the revisions. That is I have deliberately intermixed general and technical writing assignments throughout the semester, even when they are working on one of the stages of

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[7] Unlike the students that Reid surveyed (1987), my students seem to like group learning.

the term paper [Writing Assignments, p. 1 and Impromptu Topics, p. 2]. There are several reasons for doing so. First, in the beginning students have little idea of what real revision might be. They do not really rethink their papers once they have written them. By writing impromptus and essays during the time they are working on the term paper, they get a short respite from the task. With any luck they return to the term paper refreshed. Second, the short papers I assign are on topics related to language and culture, which in some cases will actually have relevance to the larger topics they have chosen. During the conferences I ask them if they can think of any way of applying the ideas in their short papers to their research effort. Third, one of my goals is to get the students to foreground their prior knowledge about their term paper topics before they begin to write. They often have a good reason for choosing their topic, but they sometimes find it difficult to articulate. Sometimes they begin to see the personal meaning of their topic when they are working on one of the shorter papers. Then they can go back to the term paper with renewed enthusiasm and a sense of personal commitment.

I would like to offer a success story about revision that illustrates the point I just made. About two years ago a Peruvian student presented about 10 pages of plagiarism as an early draft of a paper on international terrorism. He readily admitted that most of the sentences had come more or less unchanged from the book he was reading, but he had no idea how

else to manage the topic. Knowing that he was a Quechua speaker, I asked him about the political position of Quechua speakers in Peru. Eventually a fascinating story emerged. Since Quechua was the language of the Incas, the Spanish Conquistadors had tried to exterminate it as a matter of public policy, but they succeeded only in driving many of its speakers high into the Andes. Years later when the Spanish descendants set up a university system, they put a branch in the middle of that impoverished group. Needless to say the university became a center for terrorism; the instructors taught the students the procedures they needed to fight oppression. The paper that the student ultimately produced was completely revised and all his own. It had errors, but it was well organized and written with great conviction.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that setting up the course along the lines I propose involves being sensitive to some potential problems. First, technically trained students are understandably suspicious of innovations that are not carefully justified. They know that they need to learn to write, but they sometimes fail to see how reading and discussing the text will help them reach that goal. They can also become resentful if discussion topics are too theoretical and wide-ranging unless they see the connection of the talk to their writing. Although I have always explained orally what the purpose of every activity is, over the years on student evaluation forms they have complained that they do not understand exactly where the course is going. Apparently many of the students need a visual

reinforcement. After consulting Brenda Marshall, a visiting graduate student who had taken a seminar in enhancing teaching techniques, I added a section on my classroom philosophy to the syllabus in order to explain what the connection between the readings and their improved writing might be [Instructions to the Student and Student Guidelines, pp. 4-6].[4]

Second, one must make it clear to the students that the impromptus and the essays serve different but complementary purposes [#3, Philosophy of the course, p. 4]. The impromptus teach them how to write exam essays and to organize quickly under the pressure of time. We all do some formula writing at times, so this is a necessary skill (Hairston, 1986). I have written a sheet of suggestions [How to Write an Impromptu, pp. 6-7] in which I have outlined the process by which they can organize their thoughts. My purpose is to teach them how to explore their own ideas in the context of some rhetorical strategy while avoiding the danger of using any one as a straightjacket.

Third, I would like to point out that we introduce students to the computer and even take class time to teach them how to use PC Write, the program most readily available at the University of Florida. Most of them have never used one before, but they will need this skill in all of their classes. I have found that using

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[4] The only problem with doing so is that the syllabus became rather large, which meant that some of the students did not read it at all. I am therefore experimenting with ways of subdividing it into short sections and with the help of a teaching assistant, I have spent much time reorganizing my ideas and cutting out excess verbiage.

a PC makes it possible for the students to write longer papers and to revise much easier. Now if I can just convince them to use the spell check, another problem will be solved as well.

In conclusion, I would like to say that although I have been stressing the problems that need to be solved, the rewards are considerable. I think we can empower the international students so that they will be able to write dissertations without great misery. Then later on they may be able to write successfully for American journals, provided that they can get the equipment to carry out their research. If our course accomplishes those two goals, it will have served its purpose.

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